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ABSTRACT

The first step to meeting the fundamental aim of any educational institution is to understand clearly what the students need. Needs assessment is a tool educators can use to help meet this goal. Needs assessment data suggest the basis for plans, strategies, and practices that may ultimately lead to school improvement. This chapter reviews issues regarding the frequency of needs assessment and design issues in needs assessment. Concludes that efficient needs assessment requires careful consideration of a schoolwide assessment cycle, stakeholder involvement, assessment design, results, goals and objectives, and implementation and evaluation strategies. (Contains 10 references and 4 figures.) (GCP)

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Needs Assessment: An Ongoing Process for School Improvement

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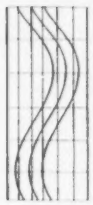


Chapter 50
Needs Assessment
An Ongoing Process for School Improvement

Cheryl Moore-Thomas & Bradley T. Erford

The primary goal of schools may be to provide for the highest possible level of student learning (Angelo & Cross, 1993). Others suggest the aim of schools is simply to provide good-quality education to all students (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985). Certainly, the first step in meeting the fundamental aim of any educational institution is to understand clearly what the students need. Needs assessment is a tool educators can use to help meet this goal. Needs assessment data suggest the basis for plans, strategies, and practices that may ultimately lead to school improvement (Lezotte & Bancroft, 1985).

Needs assessment accomplishes three main goals. First, it helps educators understand the needs of various stakeholders and subpopulations of a school community. Second, needs assessment helps establish the priorities that guide the development of educational and student support programs. Finally, needs assessment leads to continual quality improvements in educational programs (Cook, 1989). A needs assessment focuses less on present conditions than on how the present condition compares to identified goals and objectives (Wiles & Bondi, 1984).

Frequency of Needs Assessment

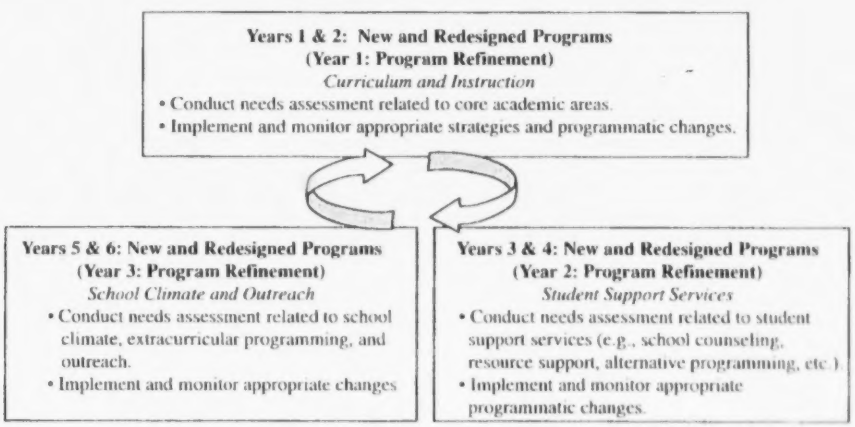
Needs assessment should occur on a frequent, rotating basis. Although it may be appealing to conduct just an annual schoolwide needs assessment, such a practice often produces results that end up being obsolete before they are adequately interpreted and used. A continual cycle of program needs assessment, however, allows time for appropriate and timely program change.

National and state standards designate specific components and competencies that should be assessed on a rotating basis. For example, a school can devote years one and two of a needs assessment cycle to conducting assessments and implementing programmatic changes that address curricular and instructional issues (e.g., Year 1: English, social

studies, and arts needs assessment; Year 2: mathematics, science, physical education, and health needs assessment). The school can then devote years three and four of the cycle to assessing student support needs such as those related to school counseling and alternative education programming. During years five and six, the school can focus on needs assessment of issues related to school climate and outreach.

A program requiring only fine-tuning may be put on a three-year continual improvement cycle. For ease of interpretation and visual conceptualization, Figure 1 shows this cycle of ongoing improvement. Assessing schoolwide needs is a big job, but it need not be overwhelming. Using a needs assessment cycle permits small increments of programmatic change that aim to improve the educational program continually. Ideally, needs assessment should be thought of as a form of progress assessment. Progress assessment implies ongoing assessment that encourages and allows for change as needed (Terenzini, 1989). Ongoing, appropriate change is fundamental to effective needs assessment.

Figure 1. Needs Assessment Cycle



Populations to Be Assessed

Stakeholders can provide useful information about the needs of a school community. Educational stakeholders are individuals who have an interest in the quality of a school's educational program (Sanders, 1992). Teachers, administrators, students, and parents are the primary educational stakeholders. Other stakeholders, such as community leaders, legislators, college and university faculty, and local businesspeople, may also provide valuable information. Unfortunately, it sometimes proves difficult to collect meaningful information from

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these other stakeholders because of their small numbers. Small sample sizes may lead to questions of validity and statistical significance of the assessment results. For these reasons, teachers, administrators, students, and parents are typically the primary stakeholders surveyed during educational needs assessment. So that the valuable input of non-school-based stakeholders is not lost, however, a school could consider conducting needs assessment with community, business, and other groups through interviews or personal contacts.

Surveys have proved to be an effective needs assessment tool for large primary stakeholder groups such as teachers, administrators, students, and parents. Surveys, however, often present return rate issues. *Return rate* refers to the percentage of surveys returned out of those sent. The higher the return rate, the lower the sampling error. A high return rate may foster greater confidence in the accuracy of the results. Generally, the return rate is increased when those being surveyed are a captive audience. For example, if a "What parents need to know about helping students with homework" needs assessment is conducted and collected at a school's back to school night, the response rate should be very high. On the other hand, if the same needs assessment is sent home to parents, the school staff may receive only 25 to 50 percent of the completed surveys. To maximize the return rate, whenever possible, surveys should be distributed, completed, and collected during a single class session, staff meeting, or parent meeting.

A final consideration in determining populations to be assessed is triangulation. *Triangulation* involves comparing and cross-checking the results of various stakeholder responses so agreement can be reached among groups on the importance of various issues. Triangulation of needs across stakeholder groups is important because it helps guarantee that the school community's needs, and not an individual's agenda, drive the school program. For example, if the school principal considers math programs to be a high priority, but teachers, parents, and students indicate that the math program is equal in priority to implementation of an arts program, the triangulated responses of the teachers, parents, and students can provide compelling evidence to adjust the focus of program change.

Design Issues in Needs Assessment

Efficient needs assessment design is essential to effective assessment. Several different yet efficient methods can be used to determine needs. Stone and Bradley (1994) recommend questionnaires

and inventories, records analysis, personal interviews, statistics, classroom visits, use of outside consultants, and systematic evaluation. Although all these methods are important and useful, questionnaires (formal or informal surveys) are most commonly used (Schmidt, 1993). Perhaps what is most important is that regardless of the instrument, the needs assessment use objective methods for data gathering and analysis (Wiles & Bondi, 1984).

Efficient needs assessment questionnaires are one to two pages in length and can be completed in just a few minutes. The content of these needs assessments is topical and focused rather than service-related (e.g., math skills, study skills, or school discipline rather than direct instruction, individual school counseling, or team teaching). Services are ways to meet needs; they are not needs in themselves. Needs assessment topics should also be related to national, state, or local standards to ensure proper program alignment.

The assessment questionnaire should ask for the name of the individual completing the form, unless the form is to be completed anonymously. Although anonymity can increase the return rate and level of disclosure on surveys, requesting the name of the respondent may allow for needed clarification, follow-up, or targeted intervention. A school should carefully consider the value of anonymous versus signed surveys before designing the needs assessment instrument. Surveys used with students should probably ask for grade level, teacher's name, and other relevant information. Parent surveys may ask for the names of the parent's children in case follow-up with the children is required. Figures 2, 3, and 4 are examples of needs assessments for teachers (student conflict resolution skills), students (preparation for college and the world of work), and parents (knowledge of school policy), respectively.

Effective survey response stems are concise and written at an appropriate reading level. Response stems usually lead to a multipoint response scale. Three to five response choices are generally satisfactory. Figure 2, for example, asks about teachers' perceptions of the frequency of situations requiring conflict resolution. The needs assessment uses a five-point scale (i.e., "Rarely," "Sometimes," "Frequently," "Most of the Time," and "Almost Always"). Figure 3 uses a four-point response scale that ranges from "Not Important" to "Very Important." It is generally a good idea not to include response choices that indicate absolutes, such as "never" and "always." Including these response choices may force responses to the center of the distribution, thus truncating the range of results. It is appropriate, however, to use response

Figure 2. Sample Middle School Teacher Needs Assessment of Students' Conflict Resolution Skills

Name: _____
Grade you teach: _____ Number of students in your homeroom: _____

Please place an X in the box that corresponds with your response.

Do students in your homeroom class:

	Rarely	**Sometimes**	**Frequently**	**Most of the Time**	**Almost Always**	*About how many of your students need help in this area?*
1. feel safe at school?						
2. complain of being bullied?						
3. feel there are confidential procedures to report violence?						
4. report violence and conflict to staff and administration?						
5. know how to effectively handle conflicts?						
6. effectively use problem-solving strategies to resolve conflicts?						
7. use the violence hotline to report threats?						
8. know how to de-escalate verbal conflicts?						

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey!

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Figure 3. Sample Secondary Level Needs Assessment of Career and College Preparation

Student's name: _____
Grade: _____

Rate the following according to its importance to your success in entering college or a career following high school graduation.

	Not Important	Somewhat Important	Important	Very Important	*I need more information on this.* *Yes*	*No*
1. Knowledge of college entrance requirements						
2. Knowledge of employment skills for the profession in which you are interested						
3. Knowledge of how to fill out a college application						
4. Knowledge of how to fill out an employment application						
5. Knowledge of how to finance a college education						
6. Knowledge of starting salaries in particular professions						
7. Knowledge of colleges offering a particular major						
8. Knowledge of companies offering job opportunities in specific professions						
9. Knowledge of how to use media to search for colleges and employers						
10. Knowledge of communication skills necessary for a successful college entrance or employment interview						

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey!

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Figure 4. Sample Parent Needs Assessment of School Policy Familiarity

Parent/guardian's name: _____
Child's name: _____
Child's grade: _____

Below is a series of questions. Answer these questions by placing a check mark in the appropriate box.

How familiar are you with the school policy on	**Very Familiar**	**Somewhat Familiar**	**Somewhat Unfamiliar**	**Very Unfamiliar**	Check if you would like to receive more information about this.
1. cheating?					
2. tardiness?					
3. absences?					
4. hallway behavior?					
5. academic requirements to participate in extracurricular activities?					
6. harassment, threats, and fights?					
7. zero tolerance for alcohol and other drugs?					

I believe my child could benefit from a program on these school policies: Yes_____No_____

I believe parents could benefit from a program on these school policies: Yes_____No_____

Thank you for taking time to complete this survey!

choices that indicate slight differences in perception as demonstrated in the response scale of Figure 4.

Notice that a word or two describes each response choice in each of the figures. These descriptors are extremely important. Surveys that include descriptors for the end points of the response scale but provide no descriptors for the center points create reliability concerns. If there are descriptors for the end points of a response scale, but only numbers to designate the center points (e.g., [Never]0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 [Always]), it will be unclear exactly how each respondent interpreted each response choice.

Another important response component of a needs assessment is frequency count. When possible, the design of the needs assessment should include an indication of how many or which specific students need intervention. Figure 2, for instance, asks teachers to indicate how many of their students need help in the given area. Figure 3 provides frequency information by asking individual students if they need help with a particular skill or topic. Frequency information can help determine implementation strategies. If, for example, the needs assessment results indicate that large numbers of students need help with a specific skill, the school may put into place schoolwide implementation vehicles, such as assemblies, classroom instruction, or schoolwide programs. If the needs assessment results suggest small numbers of students need intervention, services like small-group counseling, workshops, or tutorials may be more appropriate.

Computing Results

Tallying or computing the information from a needs assessment involves counting the number of stakeholders who may benefit from intervention (Myrick, 1997). Assigning a number value to each response category and then averaging all responses for a given item is a straightforward way to compute results. For example, in Figure 2, assume that the response categories are assigned the following values: "Rarely" = 0, "Sometimes" = 1, "Frequently" = 2, "Most of the Time" = 3, and "Almost Always" = 4. For item 6, "Do students in your class effectively use problem-solving strategies to resolve conflicts?" suppose 1 of the 25 teachers polled marked "Rarely," 5 teachers marked "Sometimes," 15 marked "Frequently," 2 marked "Most of the Time," and 2 marked "Almost Always." To compute the average, the first step would be to add the response values. This is done by multiplying the number of respondents in each category by the numeric value of that category: (1 x 0) + (5 x 1) + (15 x 2) + (2 x 3) + (2 x 4) = 49. Next, divide the sum by the total number of respondents: 49/25 = 1.96. The 1.96 average for question 6 of Figure 2 seems to suggest that, on average, teachers believe their students use effective problem-solving strategies "Frequently" to resolve conflicts. It is important to note that this computation assumes a ratio scale. The resulting average is also somewhat nebulous: What does 1.96 really mean? Even with these limitations, the average does offer a reasonable estimate of the frequency of a behavior or importance of an issue in comparison to other needs being assessed on the survey.

Converting Needs to Program Goals and Objectives

If the needs assessment is appropriately designed, translating the results into goals and learning objectives will be straightforward. The first step in the process is to prioritize the needs. Prioritization can be accomplished most easily by using the tallying, computing, and triangulation strategies previously mentioned. Next, the needs must be matched with the goals of the program and the institution, as well as national, state, and local standards. Finally, the goals must be operationalized through the development of learning objectives.

A reasonable goal stemming from the needs assessment in Figure 3 could be "To increase students' knowledge of communication skills needed for successful college entrance or employment interviews." A related objective could be "After completing the English unit on communication, 85 percent of 10th-grade students will be able to state their conversational intent (i.e., name and reason for seeking the interview) in one or two sentences during a 10-minute mock interview." Note that the goal is somewhat vague but the objective points to reasonable, specific actions that are measurable. The objective designates the group targeted for intervention, the desired behavior, measurement criteria, when the expected behavior should occur, and the level of expected performance (Gottfredson, Nettles, & McHugh, 1996). Objectives including these components are effective and lead to meaningful evaluation.

Summary

Effective and efficient needs assessment is crucial to educational programs; it does not involve merely handing out a survey, but also requires careful consideration of a schoolwide assessment cycle, stakeholder involvement, assessment design, results, goals and objectives, and implementation and evaluation strategies. When put into place, the entire needs assessment package begins at and leads back to the primary aim of the institution or educational program. When efficiently and effectively implemented, needs assessment benefits all stakeholders and the overall educational process.

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